

# The Christmas Truces of 1914: Peace in the Midst of War

In 1914, when the bulk of the soldiers on both sides of WWI were Christian and Christmastime rolled around, fighting ceased, despite orders from superiors.



by Kurt Hyde

The fighting came to a halt for many of the troops along the Western Front on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in 1914. Most historians refer to this event as the Christmas Truce of 1914. But it wasn't a single truce negotiated by diplomats at the highest levels of the gov-

ernments involved. The Christmas Truces of 1914 were negotiated informally by the troops themselves, most of whom were Christians who sincerely believed they were fighting for a just cause, regardless of which side they were on. But no matter how noble they viewed their cause, they did not want to engage in the slaughter of their fellow human beings on the Holy Day.

Some of the truces were just a head nod in agreement not to fight for a day, while many involved fraternization, meaning the troops visited with each other. There were hundreds of these individual truces, perhaps even a thousand.

There were reliable reports of Christmas Truces along the Western Front from Messines, Belgium, passing east of Armentières to Richebourg, France, a distance of about 20 miles. There were also sporadic reports of similar truces in other locations. Estimates of participation run as high as tens of thousands of soldiers. It was the largest informal truce in recorded history.

One of the truces is known to have lasted only a half hour. Many of them lasted for days or weeks after Christmas. Some of the truces ended abruptly, with hostilities resuming immediately. Others ended reluctantly. The truce in the Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium area, one where the troops resisted resuming hostilities, persisted through March of 1915.

"The war will be over by Christmas," the soldiers of both sides were told. Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II addressed some departing troops in August of 1914 saying, "You will be home before the leaves fall from the trees." The leaves fell. Many soldiers fell. As Christmas was fast approaching it became obvious the war would not be over by Christmas. Pope Benedict XV attempted to arrange a truce at Christmas, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Failing on that, the pope tried another diplomatic attempt — an exchange of prisoners of war. This request, as well as his previous message to "Lay down your arms," fell largely on deaf ears.

While peace efforts were failing, the men fighting the war were making preparations for celebrating Christmas as best

they could under the circumstances. With the exception of some units from India augmenting the British side and some units from Algeria augmenting the French side, the vast majority of the troops on both sides came from strong Christian cultures where Christmas was a major religious holiday.

### Fraternizations Began Well Before Christmas

The servicemen were promised they'd be home by Christmas and, as Christmas approached, their minds naturally turned toward that important holiday. This was true for the men in all the units: artillery, aviation, cavalry, and navy, but nowhere was it anything like what happened to the soldiers in the trenches. The soldiers in the trenches were the ones who typically endured the worst hardships, and the opposing sides were physically close to each other. The cold, rainy weather caused many trenches to be knee-deep in mud or water.

The soldiers in the opposing trenches were sometimes close enough to taunt each other verbally. As the Christmas holiday drew near, some of the taunts were replaced with Christmas greetings. This led to a few occasions where opposing soldiers would meet each other between the lines where they would exchange souvenirs.

### The High Commands Try to Avert the Truces

The high commands on both sides reacted when they learned of the episodes of fraternization. Many of the actions proved to be counterproductive.

Some commanders tried stepping up the tempo of the war by initiating attacks. One such attack was described by author Jim Murphy in his book *Truce*:

But most higher-ranking officers felt the business of war had to go on. Because fresh troops and ammunition began to arrive as winter came on, the British High Command decided to put a complete end to fraternization by launching a series of large-scale raids.

The first of these took place on December 14 at Somme in France and involved nearly two thousand men. Captain Billy Congreve watched from a nearby hill as the hastily thought-up and ill-prepared attack took place. "Imagine sending [soldiers] to attack a strongly wired position up a hill and over mud a foot deep, under frontal and [side] fire. It was a regular Valley of Death.... The attack naturally failed. We had about 400 casualties. It is most depressing."

Yet a week later, Congreve saw a newspaper report in which his com-

manders lied about the raid, boasting that it had been a complete success. His blood boiling, Congreve noted angrily, "A beautiful epitaph for those poor boys who were little better than murdered."

Another action taken to stop the fraternization was to violate one of the basic rules of war, that of the white flag. The white flag has been a symbol of surrender since shortly after the time of Christ. In more modern times, the symbol has taken on an additional meaning for military leaders to request a temporary truce to negotiate with the other side. Under the rules of war, anyone advancing under a white flag is not to be fired upon. The only exception to this is misuse of the white flag, such as using a white flag to advance closer to an enemy line, dropping it, and then starting an attack. This is a war crime known as perfidy, and all who are under the aegis of that white flag lose all protections associated with it.

Author Martin Gilbert in his book *The First World War — A Complete History* wrote about a directive issued by Winston Churchill:

Churchill informed his Admiralty officials that Sir John French had ordered "instant fire" to be made on any German white flag on the Western Front, "experience having shown that the Germans habitually and systematically abuse that emblem." Consequently, "any white flag hoisted by a German ship is to be fired on as a matter of principle." An "obviously helpless" ship would be allowed to surrender but in cases of doubt the ship should be sunk. In any naval action, "white flags should be fired upon with promptitude."

Anyone who has studied the Christmas Truces of 1914 will find very little evidence of abuse of the truces and certainly not habitual or systematic abuse of any white flags.

Another tactic used by the high commands was issuing intelligence reports warning that the preparations for Christmas should be considered a ruse. In his book *Silent Night*, Stanley Weintraub wrote of one such example:



**Burying the dead:** Typically the first order of business in the Christmas Truces of 1914 was burial detail. The religious services frequently had a profound impact on the men involved.

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Concerned about the implications of fraternization, especially Christmas cease-fires, which could have a disproportionate emotional resonance, the British High Command, from St. Omer, twenty-seven miles behind the trenches, issued a Christmas Eve warning: “It is thought possible that the enemy may be contemplating an attack during Xmas or New Year. Special vigilance will be maintained during this period.”

## The Role of Music

The year 1914 was in an era before broadcast radio stations. Most music at the front was sung by ordinary men in uniform, sometimes accompanied by musical instruments. The fighting men on both sides were encouraged by their commanders to sing patriotic songs. The Germans sang such songs as “Deutschland Über Alles” and “Die Wacht am Rhein,” the French soldiers sang “La Marseillaise,” and the British soldiers sang “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” and “God Save the King.”

The distances between opposing trenches were sometimes hundreds of yards, but distances of less than 100 yards were not uncommon. A soldier’s letter home about the truce indicated that at one point in the line only about 25 yards separated the trenches. The soldiers could frequently hear what was going on in the enemy trenches. Lt. Sir Edward Hulse, 2nd Battalion of the Scots Guards, tired of the incessant singing of patriotic German songs from the German trenches, schemed to outfox the German music meisters. Hulse wrote in a letter to his mother dated December 22, 1914:

I have got a select little party together, who, led by my stentorian voice, are going to take up a position in our trenches where we are closest to the enemy, about 80 yards, and from 10 p.m. onwards we are going to give

the enemy every conceivable form of song in harmony, from Carols to Tipperary. ... Our object will be to drown the now too familiar strains of “Deutschland Über Alles” and [“Die Wacht am Rhein”] we hear from their trenches every evening.

Hulse’s timing couldn’t have been worse regarding his intentions but couldn’t have been better in terms of encouraging Christmas Truces. During the last few days before Christmas, the selection of music changed on the German side. The singing in Hulse’s area now included Christmas carols being sung on both sides.

Not all musical endeavors enjoyed such harmless failures. One tragic event occurred when a band playing music in the German trenches, probably believing a truce would be under way at sunset, gave away its position long enough for a British artillery unit to zero on them. Robert Cowley wrote of this in his book *The Great War — Perspectives on the First World War*:

“About half-past four on Christmas Eve,” a Private Mullard of the London Rifle Brigade wrote to his parents on

the Isle of Wight, “we heard a band in the German trenches, but our artillery spoilt the effect by dropping a couple of shells right in the centre of them. You can guess what became of the band, for we have not heard it since.”

Fortunately most of the bands did not suffer similar fates. Letters from soldiers on the front contained numerous examples of band music from the German side being received with reciprocating emotions from the other side, especially after playing Christmas carols, “God Save the King,” and numerous other songs popular with the British soldiers.

Christmas Eve brought out some highly skilled musicians and singers. Troops in the trenches were spellbound by some performances of familiar Christmas carols. There were numerous reports of outstanding soloists singing “Stille Nacht” (“Silent Night”). One report of a rendition of “Stille Nacht” described the soloist as a great baritone and that all who heard him were moved. Somehow history hasn’t recorded his name. In some cases the singers were identified. Tenor Victor Granier, formerly with the Paris Opera, sang “Minuit, chrétiens, c’est l’heure solennelle” from a trench near the Argonne Forest. No one needed to understand French to recognize the familiar Christmas carol “O Holy Night.”

**Even officers quit killing on Christmas:** British and German officers, deadly foes only hours before, pose for a photo.





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emerged cautiously and walked toward the opposing trenches making it obvious they were unarmed.

Most frequently the soldiers met in the middle to negotiate the truce. There was usually at least one soldier who spoke the other side's language. Most truces were negotiated in English because of the large number of Germans who had worked in England. There was at least one truce between a German unit and a British unit where neither side had anyone who spoke the other language. Fortunately each side had at least one soldier who could speak French. That truce was negotiated in French despite not one Frenchman involved.

If there were any fallen soldiers between the lines, and that was common, the first order of business would be conducting proper burials of the dead. This was sometimes made a bit difficult by a cold front that came in just before Christmas. The freezing temperatures were generally welcomed by the troops as it was considerably easier to walk on frozen ground than slipping, sliding, and pulling one's foot out of mud as one walked.

The religious services left lasting impressions on many of the soldiers. Lance-Corporal Imlah of the Gordon Highlanders wrote of such an experience in a letter to his father describing a Christmas Day burial service:

Our padre then gave a short service, one of the items in which was Psalm XXIII. Thereafter, a German soldier, a divinity student I believe, interpreted the service to the German party. I could not understand what he was saying but it was beautiful to listen to him. The service over, we were soon fraternising with the Germans just as if they were old friends.

The soldiers, once they got to know each other, soon learned they had more in common than they had been led to believe. In addition to trading such items as

tobacco products, chocolate, cakes, and sausages, the soldiers also traded newspapers. Between the newspapers and general conversations, they discovered discrepancies in what they had been told about how the war was going. Some German soldiers were surprised to learn that England had not been invaded and London wasn't under German control. In an extract of a letter published in the *Hertfordshire Mercury* January 9, 1915, C. H. Brazier, a British rifleman, described such an event.

All through the night we sang carols to them and they sang to us and one played "God Save the King" on a mouth organ. On Christmas day we all got out of the trenches and walked about with the Germans, who when asked if they were fed up with the war said "yes, rather." They all believed that London had been captured, and that German sentries were outside Buckingham Palace. They are evidently told a lot of rot. We gave them some of our newspapers to convince them.

Not all conversations involved such incredible false assertions. Henry Williamson, who would later become the author of *Tarka the Otter* and other books, was serving near Ploegsteert in Belgium, where he participated in one of the truces. He talked with a German soldier who was convinced they were fighting for freedom and that God was on their side. Williamson and the German soldier agreed not to quarrel on Christmas Day. Conversations like this took place numerous times during the truces.

There were numerous games of soccer, or football as they called it, as well as many attempts that failed for lack of a decent playing field or a soccer ball. There were a few improvised soccer balls. The best known of these soccer games was won by the Germans by a score of 3-2. There are credible theories that there were two such games, both resulting in the same final score. Ambiguities in such simple details as the times, places, and final scores of soccer games reveal something of the nature of the Christmas Truces. They were not authorized by the high commands, and the participants were eventually threatened with court-martial for having participated in them. This drove much of the factual information underground.

In addition to the understanding of each other and goodwill built during the truces,



**Boxing Day (Dec. 26) 1914:** A photo taken by Second Lieutenant Cyril Drummond, RFA, shows British and German soldiers still at peace with each other on the day after Christmas.

there was some distrust. In some places enemy soldiers were not allowed to venture too close to the opposing trenches for fear they might be doing a little reconnaissance that would be useful once hostilities resumed.

There was also some dissension amongst those whom one would have expected to have strong allegiance. There were numerous letters from British soldiers discussing the vast differences between the Saxon Germans and the Prussian Germans. But there was one amazing letter, in the book *Christmas Truce* by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, indicating animosity between some of the French and British troops that was evidenced in a truce between French and German units:

There was general handshaking; the dead were buried; cigars, cigarettes and newspapers were exchanged and a general celebration ensued. Then the Frenchmen suggested that we shoot no longer, promised that they themselves would not resume hostilities in that event. But they added: "Beat those Britishers. We have no use for them." Well, we gladly agreed to this. Again there was handshaking, arms were resumed, and everybody crawled back to his trench. It was peace in the midst of war.

There were numerous photos taken. Some of the truces were extended through New Year's Day in order to have the film developed and the pictures printed. The pictures, having been taken by amateurs, are generally not perfectly in focus, but they were well enough in focus to prove the men standing in them were in the uniforms of opposing forces.

There were also some tragic events where soldiers thought there was a truce in their area and were killed or wounded as they walked out into no-man's land.

### How Others Spent Christmas 1914

Kaiser Wilhelm II visited his troops, but apparently not those who were in the trenches. The *New York Times* on December 30 had this account:

The Kaiser sat down to Christmas dinner with nearly 1,000 officers and



**A target as target:** An artist depicted one of the most bizarre activities reported during the Christmas Truces of 1914: a shooting competition between British and German soldiers, shooting at tin cans.

men at Great General Headquarters at Hotel de Ville in Northern France.

The article ended with a quote from the Kaiser and a description of his departure:

"Down with all enemies of Germany. Amen."

The Kaiser then visited the tables, exchanging gifts with the officers. The soldiers sang "Deutschland Über Alles" as the Kaiser left the hall.

King George V, who was a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm II, celebrated a quieter Christmas. The *Times* (London) on December 26 described the British Royal family's Christmas:

The King and Queen and their family were in residence at York Cottage, and, while there was some curtailment of their own Christmas, they did everything they could for those dependent upon them.

The royal family themselves spent Christmas in a quiet manner. In the morning they attended the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in the Park, the older members of the family remaining behind for Holy Communion.

German soldier Adolf Hitler, although

baptized a Catholic, did not participate in the Christmas observances that were available to him. His unit, the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, had just been relieved from the front, and they were in a monastery at Messines. When hearing of the truces, Hitler rejected the very idea of such truces.

### Resuming Hostilities

In some places hostilities resumed immediately after the truces. One example of this can be found in *Trench Warfare 1914-1918 — The Live and Let Live System* by Tony Ashworth, where he quoted one of the participants:

At 8.30 I fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with "Merry Christmas" on it, and I climbed on the parapet. He put up a sheet with "Thank you" on it and the German Captain appeared on the parapet. We both bowed and saluted and got down into our respective trenches, and he fired two shots in the air, and the war was on again.

Resuming hostilities was generally not so easy. Some of the units continued or renegotiated their truces. One of the tactics used by the high command to restart the hostilities was to put a combat unit

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on relief and replace it with a different unit that hadn't participated in a truce. In some cases the outgoing unit would inform the incoming unit that the Christmas Truce was still on in that location. This appears to have happened at least a few times and on both sides. Exactly how many times this happened is not known. It was all done on the sly.

In his book *Truce*, Jim Murphy quoted Major Murdoch McKenzie Wood about the truce in his area, which lasted two weeks:

I ... came to the conclusion that I have held firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would have never been another shot fired. For a fortnight that truce went on. We were on the most friendly terms, and it was only the fact that we were being controlled by others that made it necessary for us to start trying to shoot one another again.

There was a near mutiny when one of the regiments in the XIX Saxon Corps was ordered to resume hostilities. Robert Cowley wrote of this in his book *The Great War—Perspectives on the First World War*. An Australian expatriate named Ethyl Cooper was told about this by a German soldier named Vize-Feldwebel Lange while on leave in Leipzig. Cooper kept it concealed until after the armistice was signed.

The difficulty began on the 26th, when the order to fire was given, for the men struck. Herr Lange says that ... he had never heard such language as the officers indulged in, while they stormed up and down, and got, as the only result, the answer, "We can't—they are good fellows, and we can't." Finally, the officers turned on the men with, "Fire, or we do—and not at the enemy!" Not a shot had come from the other side, but at last they fired, and an answering fire came back, but

not a man fell. "We spent that day and the next," said Herr Lange, "wasting ammunition in trying to shoot the stars down from the sky."

In some truces the soldiers on each side agreed to warn each other if a high-ranking officer was planning a visit. In such cases a warning would be sent to the other side to keep their heads down during the staff visit. The troops on that side would be seemingly firing at the enemy positions but actually firing slightly over their heads.

The truce in the Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium area was probably the last to end. It reportedly lasted through the month of March. Reports say all the truces were ended by Easter, which in 1915 fell on April 4.

## **A Story Still Being Revealed**

Students of the Christmas Truces of 1914 are frustrated by a lack of official sources of information. Government officials in general reluctantly admitted that such truces occurred. The primary sources of news about these truces are found in letters written by the soldiers, some of which were printed in newspapers in the weeks following Christmas of 1914.

The facts of what happened were so successfully suppressed that some of the troops who were in the area of the truces didn't know of them. One soldier who had served in that area was telling his friends and relatives in all honesty that no such truces ever happened. He knew because he was there and it didn't happen. And then he met some of the participants and was presented with other evidences.

Two letters describing the truce, written by Major J.P.V. Hawksley and addressed to his sister Muriel, were auctioned by Bonhams. They sold for 4,750 British pounds (\$7,478). The news of this auction will certainly encourage people to search their attics and old family papers. Perhaps more letters will be found and more will be learned.

There is more being learned about these truces thanks to Operation Plum Puddings, an organization that is transcribing these letters from old newspapers and making them available to the public. ■



**"O Tannenbaum":** An artist depicted one of the Christmas Truces of 1914, with a Christmas tree in a prominent place. Many Christmas trees were supplied to the German soldiers at the front, in a war both sides were promised would be over by Christmas.